

García Loaeza, Pablo and Victoria L. Garrett eds. (2015) *The Improbable Conquest: Sixteenth-Century Letters from the Río de la Plata*. The Pennsylvania State University Press (University Park, PA). xii + 121 pp. £17.95 pbk.

*The Improbable Conquest* is the ninth volume in the series of Latin American Originals edited by Matthew Restall that was designed to bring to a non-Spanish speaking audience English translations of rare archival sources and books dating from the early colonial period. This short volume edited by Pablo García Loaeza and Victoria L. Garrett comprises letters relating to the Río de la Plata prior to 1556, a region that is often overlooked in accounts of the early conquest period. Even though the region lacked the rich minerals resources and dense populations that characterised the Andes and Mesoamerica, this volume reveals that Spaniards ventured into the region in search of similar sources wealth and power. However, they found themselves threatened by hostile populations and starvation such that the experience of conquest was distinct from those regions on which the history of conquest is often written.

The volume begins by sketching the history of the Río de la Plata region highlighting internal disputes between would-be conquistadors and the relationship between the two Spanish strongholds in Buenos Aires and Asunción. At the same time it describes the nature of Guaraní culture showing how the failure of the Spanish to respect the reciprocity embodied in the exchange of food and women for iron tools led to revolts. However, there was no organised resistance due to the lack of any centralised authority, such that Spaniards were able to exploit Guaraní rivalries relying heavily on guides, interpreters and sailors as intermediaries. The turbulent early history of the Río de la Plata region is complex in terms of personalities and ethnic alliances so this excellent succinct account enables the reader to place the letters in the political context in which they were written. The six letters written by a variety of individuals, including conquistadors, priests, and a woman, are each introduced by a commentary that draws out significant observations that may not be immediately obvious to one less familiar with the history of the region.

The first letter is from Pedro de Mendoza, the first governor and *adelantado* of Río de la Plata who on leaving the colony for Spain left instructions for his deputy Juan de Ayolas on how it should be administered. The frank style of the letter reveals the entrepreneurial impulses behind the colonial venture and the wealth and political privileges that conquistadors expected even in this remote region. The second letter by one Isabel de Guevara who had accompanied Pedro de Mendoza's expedition is particularly interesting since so few women wrote about their conquest experience. It shows that women were employed not only in household tasks such as providing food, washing, and caring for sick, but also participated in traditionally male occupations such as trimming sails, steering ships and cultivating the land, activities which Isabel deemed equally worthy of reward from the Crown.

Accounts by Ayolas's deputy Domingo Martínez de Irala and by Francisco Galan, a supporter of the second governor, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, provide differing accounts of events in the La Plata region. The letters reveal the struggles for power between the conquistadors amid native hostilities and shortages of provisions. They are laden with attempts to impress the Crown about duties rendered, such that the letter from Domingo de Irala omits many actions that were contrary to the powers given to him. While the letters might be economical with the truth they show how their attempts to impress the Crown stressed

their compliance with the law and their respect for letters granting authority to certain individuals. These two letters constitute both a useful example of the types of discrepancies that were commonplace in early accounts and an important reminder that letters should not be taken at face value or history written on the basis of a single source.

The final two letters are written by the priests, Francisco de Andrade and Martín González. These are the only two to provide some insight into Guaraní culture. They reveal rather liberal attitudes towards native behaviour while being highly critical of Spanish treatment of the native population, especially women, with González claiming that 50,000 were effectively enslaved by Christians.

The letters together paint a vivid picture of the hardships experienced by Spaniards in this region whose remoteness heightened feelings of isolation and danger. At the same time the summary execution of rivals exposes the ruthless self-interest of conquistadors. This short volume of well-chosen and well-edited letters constitutes a harrowing introduction into the nature of Spanish conquest in the Río de la Plata region, a region that was effectively beyond the rule of law. It constitutes an excellent teaching tool and serves as a reminder that there was not one type of Spanish conquest but many.

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